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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000732

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EG IS

SUBJECT: ISRAEL-EGYPT: FILM CONTROVERSY OVERSHADOWS
LIVNI-ABOUL GHEIT MEETING AND CLOUDS BILATERAL RELATIONS

REF: CAIRO 0624

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gene A. Cretz, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) Summary: FM Tzipi Livni is concerned that distorted reports about a recent Israeli documentary film is damaging both GOE-GOI relations and the Mubarak government. Discussion of the film about the IDF's Shaked reconnaissance unit during the 1967 war dominated FM Tzipi Livni's meeting with her Egyptian counterpart in Brussels on March 6 and resulted in the postponement of planned trips by high-ranking GOI officials, reportedly at the suggestion of Egyptian officials. The GOI is attempting to downplay the incident, but it underscores the underlying tensions in relations between Israel and the first Arab state with which it made peace. Perhaps in an effort to calm the situation, a senior IDF officer, speaking publicly March 7, praised security cooperation with Egypt and refrained from its usual public complaints that the GOE should do more to prevent smuggling from Sinai into Gaza and the Negev. In addition to the film and smuggling, Livni and FM Aboul Gheit also discussed the upcoming Arab League summit and agreed to seek continued strong USG participation in the MFO. End summary.

Film controversy raises tensions

¶2. (C) According to the MFA, most of the Livni-Aboul Gheit meeting on March 6 in Brussels focused on the Israeli documentary film about the IDF's Shaked reconnaissance unit during the 1967 war, which was broadcast on Israel's state-owned Channel One on February 26. Reading from the meeting report, an MFA official told PolCouns that Aboul Gheit complained that the film was "making waves and leaving scars" in the Egyptian public. He asked the GOI to "look into" the allegations that the unit killed 250 Egyptian POWs.

The head of the MFA's Egypt desk said that Aboul Gheit made no mention of a formal GOI investigation during the discussion, but "demanded" one afterwards when speaking with reporters. According to one of her special assistants, Livni believes that Aboul Gheit exacerbated the situation with his comments, but that President Mubarak and other GOE leaders are aware that it is in their own interest to overcome the dispute as quickly as possible. Livni released a public statement late on March 6 expressing "Israel's concern that certain elements in Egypt are misrepresenting the documentary film 'The Spirit of Shaked,' without checking the facts or substantiating what actually happened, with the intent of sabotaging our two countries' relations."

¶3. (C) Livni requested Aboul Gheit's assistance in reducing tensions caused by the film, which she insisted had not mentioned any murder of prisoners, a point also underscored in a statement issued by the film's producer to the Israeli media. The MFA explained to poloff that the question raised

in the film was whether a battle fought by the IDF unit with Palestinian commandos (in the Egyptian army) had been necessary at all considering the strategic situation at that point in the war, when it was already clear that Israel had defeated its Arab foes.

¶ 14. (C) The head of the MFA's Egypt desk confirmed that his counterpart in Cairo had convoked the Israeli Ambassador (reftel). The Egyptian Charge had been similarly summoned to Jerusalem on March 6 and 7 to receive complaints about Egyptian parliamentarians allegedly calling for the murder of the Israeli Ambassador. The Egyptian Embassy in Tel Aviv confirmed that they have received a copy of the film from the GOI and are in the process of translating it and preparing a transcript.

¶ 15. (C) The MFA confirmed press reports that Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer (who commanded the units involved in the 1967 incident) and MOD Political Director Amos Gilad had both postponed plans to travel to Cairo to meet with Egyptian officials. They reportedly did so after receiving "recommendations" to reconsider their travel from EGIS Chief Omar Suleiman's office. The MFA (please protect) added that Ben Eliezer had written a personal letter to Suleiman with his own recollections of the battle described in the film.

Other issues: Sinai, Arab League summit, MFO

¶ 16. (C) On other issues, Aboul Gheit told Livni that Lebanon would be the central focus of the upcoming Arab League summit. Aboul Gheit reportedly said he did not expect the

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summit to agree on any changes to the Arab League peace plan to address Israeli concerns about the plan's handling of the Palestinian refugee issue.

¶ 17. (C) While discussing the Sinai and Gaza, Livni said Egypt needed to be more vigorous in stopping smuggling of weapons, explosives, and money. Aboul Gheit promised to pass these comments to Suleiman. While discussing ways to secure the border, Aboul Gheit maintained that the Egyptian public would oppose the idea of building a water-filled trench along the Philadelphi Corridor. Note: In a briefing at the Likud-oriented Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs March 7, IDF Southern Commander MG Yoav Gallant said that Egypt has a strong interest in preventing terrorism in the Sinai and in Israel. He added that cooperation has improved in the past year, with the two countries working together to solve security challenges. He acknowledged that smuggling in the region was nothing new, but that it had primarily been an issue for the police until terrorists began taking advantage of the routes. In Gallant's opinion, a physical barrier along the border would help, although he said that such a solution would take years to construct. Gallant's comments differ from the usual GOI public criticism of Egypt for failing to control its border. The Egyptian Embassy welcomed these remarks, telling poloff that they had asked the IDF to make such statements public after hearing a similar message during the most recent GOI-GOE military-to-military committee meeting at the end of February. End note.

¶ 18. (C) Livni and Aboul Gheit agreed to oppose the possible withdrawal or reduction of US military personnel in the MFO. Aboul Gheit said he hoped the USG would reject any recommendations to take such a step.

¶ 19. (C) Comment: The storm in Cairo over the Israeli documentary underscores the current fragility of Israel's relations with Egypt. While Israeli officials frequently express frustration with the GOE over a wide range of issues, and especially what they see as Egypt's lax handling of the smuggling into Gaza, they also admit that they are even more

worried about what may happen after Mubarak passes from the scene. General Gallant's public remarks may represent an effort to send a more positive message about the state of Israeli-Egyptian security cooperation after months of Egypt-bashing by a number of Israeli officials.

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